

Death, Gender, and Agency in Shakespeare

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's tragic plays often detail the familial and romantic relationships between men and women, pinpointing the gendered dynamics that affect the balance of power. In plays like *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, these gender dynamics contribute to the way that the women are subject to a male counterpart's will, which overshadows their agencies with ambiguity and, ultimately, plays a hand in their deaths.

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Process Analysis Statement:

The process of writing a thesis is, predictably, a challenging undertaking. For a student on the cusp of graduation, it is easy to procrastinate or otherwise overlook the workload that accompanies a thesis. After reflecting on my time spent working on my thesis over the course of this semester, I have realized that the work I pushed myself to do in the beginning of the semester (finding sources, jotting down thoughts and ideas), even if small, were instrumental in helping make my thesis a bit less overwhelming in the end. I am grateful to my past self for having enough foresight to account for the workload of my future self, and taking steps to lessen the impact of doing my work all at once. The basis of my thesis rests on my extensive studies of Medieval and Early Modern literature; throughout my undergraduate college career, I took as many Medieval and Renaissance British literature courses as I could, zeroing in on one of my chief interests: Shakespearean literature. I also took literature courses that focused on issues of gender which fascinated me greatly. I felt it was only natural to combine these two great interests from my undergraduate studies. I furthered my research by using the tools provided by Ball State, including the online library database, which gave me access to scholarly, peer-reviewed journals, which I used to supplement my thesis. Through the process of writing my thesis, I learned that if I am not intentional about working on it consistently, I will have a tendency to procrastinate and make myself anxious with the mounting work. It was challenging to root myself in the present and focus on my thesis while graduation was looming on the horizon. My thesis offers a look into the way gender plays into Shakespearean tragedies (with a focus on *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*) in relation to death and autonomy, and is an exploration of female characters' lack of control, either ultimately in the conclusion of the play or simply throughout the course of their written lives.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was a poet and playwright in England during the height of the Renaissance and under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I and James I. His numerous poems and plays often dissect the relationships between men and women, sometimes ensuing in hilarity, romance, or tragedy. A product of its time, Shakespearean plays frequently feature female characters in non-autonomous settings under the authority of their husbands and fathers. This lack of agency is the focus of this thesis.

Female agency in medieval and renaissance literature has had an extensively questioned existence; do women in these works have any control of their fates, any semblance of autonomy? In Shakespeare's tragedies, women function in numerous and varied roles, but there remains the common thread of the question of their agency. The relationship between their gender and their agency is further put into question when we examine their deaths. How does their gender (or their experience as sexual beings) affect their worth in life and, potentially, contribute to their deaths? In the tragedies *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, the relationship between the women and their deaths all raise questions of autonomy and ambiguity. How do the deaths of the main female characters in these plays reveal the struggle for female agency? I have chosen to examine the characters of Lavinia (*Titus Andronicus*), Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*), and Desdemona (*Othello*), because I believe that each leading lady's death offers an insight into the way their respective relationships—both to other characters and to their own identities—impacts the way that their agency (or lack thereof) functions in their lives—and deaths.

Titus Andronicus: Post-Ravishment Autonomy and Lavinia as Rome's Ornament

Beginning with Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*, this tragedy features one of the most disturbing treatments of a woman in any of his plays. Lavinia, the daughter of the titular Titus Andronicus, is known for her beauty and chastity; she is "Rome's rich ornament," a practically perfect example of grace and womanhood (1.1.52). These descriptions—which define not only her character, but also her quantifiable worth as an asset to her father and value as a marriageable commodity—make Lavinia less of a person, and more of an object to be bartered for or ogled at. Because of her worth in social and familial structures, Lavinia is generally left to the devices of the men around her, unable to exercise much self-governance. For example, although she is betrothed to Bassianus, her father duly agrees to have Lavinia married to his brother, Saturninus, instead:

SATURNINUS. And for an onset, Titus, to advance

Thy name and honorable family,

Lavinia will I make my empress,

Rome's royal mistress, mistress of my heart,

And in the sacred Pantheon her espouse.

Tell me, Andronicus, doth this motion please thee? (1.1.240-245)

Titus readily agrees to this union, despite Bassianus' protests—"this maid is mine" (1.1.279). After Saturninus casts his betrothal to Lavinia aside in favor of marrying Tamora, Bassianus is free to reclaim his woman. On all accounts, between Titus, Saturninus, and Bassianus, Lavinia is a commodity to be traded, fought over, and

discarded, not an autonomous being capable of exercising her own agency. From the start of the play, Lavinia is subjected to the control of men. Even with her betrothed and briefly espoused Bassianus, there is a possession-driven rhetoric present whenever he speaks about her, objectifying her as something to be bought or won:

BASSIANUS. "Rape" call you it, my lord, to seize my own,

My true betrothed love and now my wife?

But let the laws of Rome determine all.

Meanwhile am I possessed of that is mine. (1.1.413-416)

Unfortunately for Lavinia (and weak-stomached readers), Bassianus' comment about rape foreshadows Lavinia's rape later in the play: after being under the social and marital control of her male counterparts, Lavinia also falls into the sexual control of Tamora's two remaining sons, Demetrius and Chiron. Tamora's lover, Aaron, encourages the men to take whatever they want from Lavinia:

AARON. The forest walks are wide and spacious,

And many unfrequented plots there are,

Fitted by kind for rape and villainy.

Single you thither then this dainty doe,

And strike her home by force, if not by words. (2.1.121-125)

Lavinia's purity is a luxurious prize to be won, or perhaps more accurately, to be stolen; in her article entitled "'The Gnawing Vulture': Revenge, Trauma Theory, and

'*Titus Andronicus*,'" Deborah Willis describes the importance of female purity, saying, "women appeared, if at all, as idealized figures of chastity to be protected or, more darkly, as vulnerable vessels of the enemy to be raped and despoiled" (24). Aaron persuades Chiron and Demetrius to abuse the "vulnerable vessel" that is Lavinia, because it is the most vicious crime that they can conceivably commit, not only against her, but against their notions of womanhood itself.

The crimes that Demetrius and Chiron plot against Lavinia are so heinous and appalling to heaven itself, that it must be undertaken in the solitude of the depths of the woods, where no one—not even God—can see or hear it occur:

The Emperor's court is like the house of Fame,
 The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears;
 The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull.
 There speak and strike, brave boys, and take your turns.
 There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven's eye,
 And revel in Lavinia's treasury. (2.1.133-139)

In this interaction between Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius, Lavinia is defined by her close-guarded sexual potential, because her purity is so appealingly forbidden that the men wish to tarnish it and ravage her for their own pleasure. Even Lucrece, described by the Folger edition of *Titus Andronicus* as "a Roman matron who exemplified married chastity," "was not more chaste / Than this Lavinia" (2.1.115-116). Lavinia is not just desirable because she is beautiful or sexually appealing, but because she embodies the

opportunity for men to conquer something valuable and pure and remove any semblance of agency from her to gain power and pride.

The fact that Aaron tells Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia in the "dreadful, deaf, and dull" woods where they cannot be seen or heard makes sense not only from a logistical standpoint (staging such a scene would be extremely difficult), but it is also reminiscent of the way that rape and violence against women is kept hidden, normalizing it by keeping it out of the light (2.1.136). In her article, "Rape's Metatheatrical Return: Rehearsing Sexual Violence among the Early Moderns," Kim Solga discusses the lack of staging of rape scenes in early modern theatre:

...the most likely reason for rape's inevitable stage absence is that its representation in the early modern theatre is designed not to reflect what we understand about the experience of rape—the victim's heinous bodily and psychic violation—but to echo the experience of those to whom rape is reported, who can know it only as vicarious witnesses... Rape is staged in early modern England as it is made known in the world beyond the stage: as a rehearsal for public confirmation, as an event that has the scent of metatheatrics always about it. (55)

The theatrical use of the hidden ravishment is flanked by the before and the after; we see what leads up to a rape, and what follows it, but not the act itself. Not only this, but we are not particularly concerned about what *happened*, but rather how it can be theatricized and recited in such a way that the public believes it.

Entirely persuaded by Aaron, Chiron and Demetrius prepare to fulfill their rape fantasy in the woods, plotting to steal Lavinia's sexual agency. Although Lavinia pleads with Tamora to be killed rather than raped by her sons, Tamora is unmoved, despite their shared identities in womanhood. After the men murder Bassianus, they look forward to enjoying Lavinia's "nice-preserved honesty" with viciousness, and also with the approval of their wicked mother:

LAVINIA. O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust,

And tumble me into some loathsome pit

Where never man's eye may behold my body.

Do this, and be a charitable murderer.

TAMORA. So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee.

No, let them satisfy their lust on thee. (2.3.175-180)

Tamora will not be persuaded by Lavinia's pleas for death, prompting Lavinia to question her humanity and, specifically, her womanhood: "No grace, no womanhood? Ah, beastly creature, / The blot and enemy to our general name..." (2.3.182-183). There is no camaraderie to be found in the shared plight (or strength) of womanhood between Tamora and Lavinia. Instead, they are driven apart by their victimization from men; Tamora takes revenge on Titus' killing of her son by allowing her sons to do whatever they want to Lavinia. They are each hurt by the agency they are refused from men, and are turned against one another so that they cannot even commiserate in their shared injustices. Instead, Tamora purposely inflicts pain on Lavinia by encouraging behavior

that dehumanizes her and feeds into the toxic masculinity of her sons, truly betraying her sex by perpetuating sexual violence against a fellow woman.

After her ravishment off stage—which is so monstrous that it has to be committed away from the eyes of man and God—Lavinia is led back onstage by her assailants, and we see her for the first time. The state she is in is difficult to stomach while reading, and extremely difficult to watch in stage and film productions. Demetrius and Chiron have not only raped Lavinia, robbing her of the chastity that was so precious to her, but they have also brutally mutilated her. Instead of killing her, which would be merciful by comparison, the men choose to cut her tongue out and cut off her hands so she cannot tell anyone who assaulted her. Lavinia's rape and mutilation is an amplified version of the Greek figure, Philomela, from the sixth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, who was raped by her brother-in-law and had her tongue cut out so she would not be able to tell anyone. Philomela eventually reveals what has befallen her by weaving a depiction of what happened to her on a tapestry. Chiron and Demetrius' decision to cut off Lavinia's hands in addition to her tongue ensure that, unlike Philomela, she will not be able to weave—or write about—her attackers.

If Lavinia could communicate what happened to her, she would, according to Solga, be expected to be able to recite what occurred in the woods, putting on the kind of sick, theatrical show that traumatized women must immediately perform to prove they are not lying, despite the fact that this theatrical visitation of trauma is itself, in my opinion, inherently traumatic; rape victims would, historically, have to “behave more or less as their dramatic counterparts do, using a standardized combination of show-and-tell to report their violations to trustworthy men” (Solga 56). Understanding the

"experience of rape" is not nearly as important as whether or not "vicarious witnesses" believe it or can do anything about it (Solga 55). In Lavinia's case, she is not even able to speak to the experience of her rape—she has been physically silenced, becoming not only stripped of her autonomy, but also even more of a spectacle for theatrical shock and fear, which we see when Chiron and Demetrius mercilessly mock her:

DEMETRIUS. So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,

Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON. Write down thy mind; bewray thy meaning so,

An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.

DEMETRIUS. See how with signs and tokens she can scrawl.

CHIRON, [*to Lavinia*]. Go home. Call for sweet water; wash thy hands.

DEMETRIUS. She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;

And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

CHIRON. An 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.

DEMETRIUS. If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (2.4.1-10)

If the men simply wanted to prevent Lavinia from telling anyone about who hurt her, then killing her would have been the best course of action. Instead, they choose to silence her while still keeping her alive. I believe that this is because it gives Chiron and Demetrius more power over her; they know that for however long Lavinia is alive—whether she were to bleed out quickly and die, abandoned in the forest, or survive her

terrible ordeal—she would be a theatrical testament to their cruelty and their ability to conquer a woman with sexual and physical violence. Lavinia is a tool that heightens her assaulters' egos and gratifies their behavior with lasting evidence of what they have done. Killing her would not have been enough; they had to make her an example of how little agency a woman has when us against the desires of a man, and then abandon her in the woods by herself.

After her rape and mutilation, Lavinia is found by her uncle, Marcus, and is unable to tell about what happened to her—or even commit suicide (“If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord”) to avoid her shame—Lavinia is powerless to exercise her own agency even to end her own suffering (2.4.10). Marcus comments on the fact that Lavinia, the figure that was once Rome’s ornament, is now reduced to defilement:

MARCUS. Speak, gentle niece. What stern ungentle hands

Hath lopped and hewed and made thy body bare

Of her two branches, those sweet ornaments

Whose circling shadows kings have sought to sleep in (2.4.16-19)

In this lengthy monologue, Marcus describes Lavinia by reducing her to her physical parts; her “ungentle hands,” “rosèd lips,” “honey breath,” cheeks, heart, tongue, and fingers are all referenced in his blazon, reminding us that Lavinia, like a piece of art, is an object to be looked upon (2.4.16, 24, 25). Lavinia’s value is determined by her parts; the damage to her hands, tongue, and, most importantly, chastity, makes her a damaged good. Chiron and Demetrius know this, which is why they mock her, and

Marcus knows this, which is why he extensively mourns the ruination of specific parts of her body.

Lavinia returns home with Marcus, and is presented to Titus and Lucius, Lavinia's brother, who are aghast with horror at the sight of her. Titus mourns her mutilation, launching into a distraught soliloquy in which he considers cutting out his own tongue or removing his own hands in his commiseration and grief. Willis describes the dynamic of the Andronicus family grief stemming from a loved one's trauma as secondary trauma:

...trauma does not stop with the individual victim; rather, family members and others close to the victim experience a form of secondary trauma... [Parents] are subjected to potentially overwhelming experiences of loss, powerlessness, humiliation, and other threats to psychological integrity. (25, 26)

Lavinia's trauma, shared with her father and brother, causes them to reflect on themselves; Titus exclaims, "he that wounded her / Hath hurt me more than had he killed me dead" (3.1.93-94). Curiously, one of Titus' first reactions to Lavinia's ravishment—along with grief for his daughter—is grief for himself; he launches into a wallowing speech about his sorrows. To be sure, he has many reasons to be sorrowful—all but one of his sons is dead, and now his daughter has been raped and mutilated. But it seems unusual that in the presence of his daughter, who is dealing with fresh physical and psychological wounds, he goes on a relentless rant about how much seeing her hurts *him*. In his article, "Interpreting 'Her Martyr'd Signs': Gender and Tragedy in Titus Andronicus," Douglas E. Green similarly points to the fact that

"[Lavinia's] mutilated body 'articulates' Titus' own suffering and victimization" (322).

Fortunately, Lucius is not ignorant of the insensitivity of Titus essentially saying that seeing Lavinia's downfall is the greatest source of his pain, interrupting his father to say, "Sweet father, cease your tears, for at your grief / See how my wretched sister sobs and weeps" (3.1.138-139). In Lavinia's worst day of her life, Titus manages to make it about his grief, and makes his daughter feel even worse for being the cause of that grief; Lavinia's mutilation and lost chastity is bad for her, but catastrophic for her father: "it is largely through an on the female characters that Titus is constructed and his tragedy inscribed" (Green 319). Female tragedy, like Lavinia's, is peripheral to the greater resulting tragedy of her father.

Eventually, after her family overcomes the initial shock of her assault, Lavinia attempts to tell her family about her trauma, chasing her young nephew around and trying to get them to look at his school books and pull out his copy of Ovid so she can use his story about Philomela to explain what has happened to her:

YOUNG LUCIUS. Help, grandsire, help! My aunt Lavinia

Follows me everywhere, I know not why.—

Good uncle Marcus, see how swift she comes!—

Alas, sweet aunt, I know not what you mean. (4.1.1-4)

Although this is an absurd, almost comical image of Lavinia running after her frightened nephew, it also speaks to the fear that is now attached to Lavinia. She has transformed from something beautiful to something monstrous; her womanhood has been tainted, her physicality has been warped, and her ability to speak—a uniquely human trait—has

been destroyed. Children run from her as if she were poisonous. She is not only no longer a 'good woman' anymore, but she is barely even human.

Finally, after poor young Lucius is saved from his trailing aunt, Lavinia is able to get them to open the Ovid and communicates to her family members what happened to her by taking a stick in her mouth and writing the names of her assailants in the dirt on the ground, improvising a way to communicate, much like Philomela: "*Stuprum*. Chiron, Demetrius" (4.1.79). *Stuprum*, Latin for rape, reveals definitively to her father that Lavinia was, indeed, defiled and no longer pure. Lavinia's family's secondary trauma that they experience from her ravishment and mutilation is, naturally, in part because their loved one has been irrevocably hurt (physically, sexually, psychologically), but also in that they share in her humiliation—her shame reflects on them, and burdens them with grief: "Had I but seen thy picture in this plight / It would have madded me. What shall I do, / Now I behold thy lively body so?" (3.1.105-107). Titus' speech "re-presents Lavinia as both the occasion and the expression of his madness, *his* inner state" (Green 322). Beholding Lavinia's body—the source of shame—is grievous to Titus because it ruins the experience of looking at her, which was her sole purpose as an ornament or object prior to her ravishment.

Feigning madness—"I knew them all, though they supposed me mad, / And will o'erreach them in their own devices"—Titus plots his revenge against Chiron and Demetrius on behalf of his daughter, causing them to let down their guard around him and become vulnerable (5.2.145-146). Titus' "madness" is a slippery slope that begins with Titus' assurance that it is merely a ruse to seem nonthreatening to his enemies but later leads to questions about whether or not it is entirely contrived. Whether real or fake

(or a bit of both), Titus' madness—which stems from the crimes against his daughter—fuels his incentive for revenge. After successfully acting like a madman and causing the men to relax, Titus binds Chiron and Demetrius and slits their throats while Lavinia watches, holding a basin between her handless arms to collect their blood. Titus condemns them for their crimes, saying, “Both her sweet hands, her tongue, and that more dear / Than hands or tongue, her spotless chastity, / Inhuman traitors, you constrained and forced” (5.2.179-181). Although Titus avenges his daughter's pain and humiliation, we are again reminded how much worth is placed on a woman's chastity, which directly reflects the esteem of her father or husband.

Even though a raped woman is stripped of her agency over her own body when she is assaulted, in Shakespearean literature (and other literature written before, during, and after Shakespeare's time), she is still responsible for the shame she must be expected to endure, as well as the shame her assault places on the people around her, particularly male authority figures in her life, like her father or husband. The fact that Lavinia is no longer “pure” outweighs the emotional and physical trauma of her rape and mutilation—the damage to her reputation, and by proxy, Titus' reputation, is the most damning offence against Chiron and Demetrius.

The satisfaction modern audiences may feel at Titus' revenge against his daughter's assailants is short-lived after he returns to the palace to reveal to Tamora that her sons have been killed (and baked into pies that she eats). Titus questions Saturninus about what a man's retributive duty is when his daughter is raped:

TITUS. My lord the Emperor; resolve me this:

Was it well done of rash Virginius

To slay his daughter with his own right hand

Because she was enforced, stained, and deflowered?

SATURNINUS. It was Andronicus.

TITUS. Your reason, mighty lord?

SATURNINUS. Because the girl should not survive her shame,

And by her presence still renew his sorrows.

TITUS. A reason mighty, strong, and effectual;

A pattern, precedent, and lively warrant

For me, most wretched, to perform the like.

Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame with thee,

And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die.

[*He kills Lavinia.*] (5.3.35-47)

Titus kills his poor daughter, who was raped and mutilated by two men, robbed of the chastity that defined her character and denoted her value as a person, because her shame was too much for him to bear. Lavinia must die so *she* does not renew *Titus'* sorrows. Lavinia is not her own person, especially after her worth is destroyed following her ravishment, but is instead an extension of her father, a withered branch on their family tree that must be pruned to cast off Titus' shame.

The Tragedy of Macbeth: Unsexing Lady Macbeth

In a stark contrast to the mild-mannered Lavinia is the decidedly less feminine Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth is completely unlike Shakespearean women like Desdemona and Lavinia, as she is not pure and sweet and righteous; instead, she is rather like a snake, waiting for her opportunity to strike; she will "Look like th' innocent / flower, / But be the serpent under't" (1.6.76-78). In *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, the titular character's wife has a notably fiery and ambitious disposition, pressuring her husband to kill the king, Duncan, and anyone else who stands in their way of climbing the social ladder of power. Although Lady Macbeth is instrumental in setting the plot of *Macbeth* in motion, she curiously seems to vanish near the end of play, dying ambiguously without a second thought from her husband.

Lady Macbeth is not only preoccupied with gaining power, but she is also particularly vicious. For example, Lady Macbeth pushes her husband to kill King Duncan in order that he can become king in his place, and mocks him for his hesitation against killing his friend:

MACBETH. We will proceed no further in this business.

He hath honored me of late, and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people,

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,

Not cast aside so soon.

...

LADY MACBETH. When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man (1.7.34-38, 56-58)

Part of what makes Lady Macbeth more capable of taking control is her banishment of any feminine attributes and softness. She prepares herself for plotting Duncan's murder by stripping herself of her weaknesses or any faintness of heart, which translates to stripping herself of the constructions of her gender:

LADY MACBETH. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood.
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. (1.5.47-57)

In this passage, Lady Macbeth calls for whatever spirits or forces may be to deliver her from feminine characteristics that may hold her back; any tenderness, preoccupation towards guilt, or motherly nurturing should be expelled from her body in order that she may achieve her purpose. Lady Macbeth targets specifically feminine hindrances to her plan; she begs to be "unsexed" so she is not too weak or timid to achieve her goal, and she references breastmilk—a nurturing substance exclusively produced by women to feed babies—and offers it up as sustenance for "murd'ring ministers" (1.5.48, 55). Lady

Macbeth casts off—and even exchanges—her womanly and motherly attributes for power.

In her article, "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England," Stephanie Chamberlain describes the anxieties associated with women shirking their feminine or motherly roles, which revealed "early modern fears of maternal agency" (77). Lady Macbeth uses maternal language in a kind of incantation, invoking spirits like a witch might by mixing magic and motherhood. Lady Macbeth offers her maternal body in exchange for power, promising to nurture dark spirits the way a mother would nurture a child. The "fears of maternal agency" are hinged on the prospect that a woman may pervert the traditionally pure, wholesome role of motherhood. For Lady Macbeth, witchery and motherhood go hand in hand as they allow her to abuse the unique natural ability a woman has to achieve motherhood in order to get what she wants.

Ultimately, Lady Macbeth has so much autonomy not because she is a strong woman, but because she makes herself like a man, abolishing traditionally feminine or motherly instincts or stereotypes to get rid of her natural inclinations toward weakness due to her sex. She decides to do anything she must in order to gain power, taking the reins as a leader—which is typically a man's role—and persuading her husband to match her ambition. Lady Macbeth exerts a great deal of influence over her husband, masterminding the murder plot against Duncan and convincing Macbeth to actually go through with it, because she has a great amount of agency in spite of her womanhood—due to the fact that she abandons that womanhood:

LADY MACBETH. I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
 And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this. (1.7.62-67)

There is no strength or autonomy to be found in a woman; women nurse babies and take care of families. Lady Macbeth viciously casts this notion aside; if motherhood is the only suitable role for women, Lady Macbeth wants nothing to do with it—she would sooner murder her own child than give up her chance at power. Lady Macbeth's cruel description of infanticide reveals a great deal about her characterization; more specifically, Chamberlain describes the importance of Lady Macbeth's statement to other women, saying, "What is perhaps most revealing about Lady Macbeth's proudly defiant disclosure is how absolutely empowering such a fantasized moment proves to one struggling to break free from the gendered constraints that bind her" (82). Lady Macbeth seems to effectively shirk the expectations of womanhood with conviction and completely un-feminine hostility. Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's assertion that she would "dash the brains out" of a child is not borne out of an inherent hatred of that child (1.7.66). Rather, "her empowerment is crucially dependent upon a loving relationship with the one she will shortly slaughter; it must be a blood sacrifice" (Chamberlain 82). Lady Macbeth's decidedly un-feminine sentiment is shocking as it contradicts one of the greatest responsibilities of womanhood—motherhood—while also acknowledges the love that is shared between a mother and her child. The fact that Lady Macbeth would not only slaughter a child, but *her* child that she *loves*, proves that she is exercising her

agency not only over patriarchal systems of control, but also over nature itself; "Perhaps no other early modern crime better exemplifies cultural fears about maternal agency than does infanticide, a crime against both person and lineage" (Chamberlain 75). Any of Lady Macbeth's inklings of motherly affection or tenderness is resolutely quashed in favor of gaining power.

Unfortunately for Lady Macbeth, her confidence in killing Duncan and rising to power with her husband becomes overshadowed, as she is consumed by guilt and paranoia. Macbeth's own descent into madness does not seem so out of character; after all, he murdered people he considered to be his friends, and was hesitant to do so from the beginning. But for Lady Macbeth, who never had any qualms about committing murder and did so coolly and nonchalantly, her sudden onset of guilt seems uncharacteristic. I believe that this is, at least in part, due to her womanhood; characters like Iago from *Othello* and Aaron from *Titus Andronicus* stick to their villainy until the very end, but Lady Macbeth's cruelty and lust for power are ultimately conquered by her weakness as a woman. Macbeth's murder of Lady Macduff and her children touches some yet unseen part of Lady Macbeth's heart, as she seems to spiral into madness after their slayings. In his article, "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender," Robert Kimbrough argues that "Shakespeare sensed that so long as one remains exclusively female or exclusively male, that person will be restricted and confined, denied human growth. Each will be the prisoner of gender, not its keeper" (175). A rather hopeful view of Shakespeare's personal gender politics, Kimbrough's interpretation of the outcome of avoiding gender exclusivity only works for characters like Lady Macbeth up to a point; although she exchanges feminine traits for masculine ones, she ultimately is overcome

by the natural inclinations of her womanhood. Some repressed responsibility to take care of children, or even other women, overrules her individual quest for masculine agency. Lady Macbeth, as with all women, have a social, biological expectation to be unconditionally nurturing, maternal figures. This temporarily muted expectation appears to catch up to Lady Macbeth, gnawing at her mental state as she imagines seeing spots of blood on her hands that cannot be washed away.

Even more uncharacteristic than her guilt is Lady Macbeth's manner of dying; though vicious, calculating, and disposed toward villainy on a grand scale, her death is quiet, and can be easily overlooked:

MACBETH. Wherefore was that cry?

SEYTON. The Queen, my lord, is dead. (5.5.19-20)

This short exchange is followed by Macbeth postulating about the nearness of death, after which everyone returns their attention to the approaching armies of Macduff and Malcolm. For such an instrumental character, Lady Macbeth's death is ambiguous and unimportant, occurring off-stage by less-than-clear means. Her paranoia and guilt lead many to believe that she committed suicide, but the truth is that her death is casually mentioned and quickly forgotten, as if she simply "was not as tough as she thought she was" (Kimbrough 187). Macbeth's death, by contrast, is a grand execution of revenge; his head is carried onstage for all to see, even though it is Lady Macbeth who most likely deserved this treatment, as she hatched the original plans against Duncan and pushed Macbeth to carry them out. Lady Macbeth clearly cannot be considered a protagonist, but she has all the makings of being the main villain, only to be cast aside and not given the credit—or punishment—that Macbeth receives in her stead. As a

female character, she is merely a tool, and any sense of agency we see in her is borrowed from a temporary alteration of her nature to be more like that of a man; in the end she returns to womanhood, where "insanity and suicide were considered signs of weakness, signs of cowardice, [and] therefore partaking of the 'feminine'" (Kimbrough 187).

The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice: Hearsay and Turning Virtue into Pitch

Compared to *Titus Andronicus* and *Macbeth*, Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, also known simply as *Othello*, is set apart in that it features the spousal murder of the beautiful and virtuous Desdemona at the hands of her new husband, Othello. Like Lady Macbeth, Desdemona's death is connected to the choices her husband makes, and like Lavinia, Desdemona's death is a result of her alleged loss of chastity.

The best case for Desdemona's agency is exercised in the beginning of the play (and even before the actual start of the play), in her bold decision to pursue Othello romantically despite his blackness. Although this could also be the result of naïveté and curiosity (Othello claims that Desdemona would come listen to him, and "with a greedy ear / Devour up my discourse"), Desdemona stands by her decision to marry Othello and cleave from her father, Brabantio (1.3.173-174). Standing against her father's claims that she was stolen or bewitched by Othello, Desdemona exercises her autonomy by choosing to marry a black man:

DESDEMONA. My noble father,

I do perceive here a divided duty.

To you I am bound for life and education.

My life and education both do learn me
 How to respect you. You are the lord of duty.
 I am hitherto your daughter. But here's my
 husband.
 And so much duty as my mother showed
 To you, preferring you before her father,
 So much I challenge that I may profess
 Due to the Moor my lord. (1.3.208-218).

Although Desdemona has an obligation to her father as his charge, her obeisance to him is challenged by her newfound obligation to her husband. This shift in power from a father to a husband would be normal, if it were not for the fact that Desdemona takes the issue of marriage into her own hands. Instead of being given away by her father to a man that he chooses—or at least approves of—Desdemona essentially gives herself away in marriage without including her father in the decision. Not only that, but Desdemona marries a man that she knows her father would very clearly not approve of; she cleaves from her father and binds herself to a Moor. Desdemona's choice to exercise her agency independently of her father allows her to take on a role that is not unlike a man's; in fact, Othello claims that after hearing his tales of adventure, Desdemona "wished / That heaven had made her such a man" (1.3.187-188). Although Desdemona does not act on this sentiment to the same extent that Lady Macbeth does, both women at least entertain the notion of abandoning the feminine limits of their lives as women in favor of pursuing their desires for masculine agency.

After proving that she did in fact marry Othello of her own volition, however, Desdemona shifts from being seen as an autonomous young woman to functioning as a tool to drive the plot, which culminates in the ultimate destruction of agency—her violent death. Because Desdemona's agency appears to stem naïveté and altruism, she—and Othello—are easily manipulated by an unseen adversary, Iago:

IAGO. Cassio's a proper man. Let me see now:

To get his place and to plume up my will

In double knavery—How? how?—Let's see.

After some time, to abuse Othello's {ear}

That he is too familiar with his wife.

He hath a person and a smooth dispose

To be suspected, framed to make women false.

The Moor is of a free and open nature

That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,

And will as tenderly be led by th' nose

As asses are. (1.3.435-445)

In this passage, Iago decides to begin implanting false rumors of Desdemona's unfaithfulness to Othello with a man named Cassio, slowly driving Othello to paranoia. His motives are unclear, but he frequently exclaims, "I hate the Moor" (1.3.429). To satisfy his hatred against Othello, who ignorantly believes Iago to be a trusted friend (he refers to him as "Honest Iago"), he turns to Desdemona as a device for facilitating Othello's downfall (1.3.336):

I'll pour this pestilence into his ear:
 That she repeals him for her body's lust;
 And by how much she strives to do him good,
 She shall undo her credit with the Moor.
 So will I turn her virtue into pitch,
 And out of her own goodness make the net
 That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.376-382)

Making Othello believe that Cassio is "too familiar with his wife" allows Iago to make Desdemona seem to be an unvirtuous wife, preying on her honor in a more indirect way than Chiron and Demetrius do to Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, spurring the progression of villainous events much like Aaron does (1.3.439). The imagery included in Iago's soliloquy call to mind how dirty and disgusting his rumors are; his lies are a "pestilence" which blackens Desdemona's "virtue into pitch" (2.3.376, 380). The question of Desdemona's sexuality and faithfulness to her husband is no longer a private matter between spouses, but instead a tool that can be used to besmirch Desdemona and manipulate Othello; it is the "net / That shall enmesh them all (2.3.382).

Ultimately, Iago's insidious rumors about Desdemona result in Othello's decision to kill her: "Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men. / Put out the light, and then put out the light" (5.2.6-7). Desdemona's worth is exclusively hinged on her perceived purity; although she has been a faithful wife to Othello, who insists in the beginning of the play that she is virtuous (foreshadowing their downfall as he hinges "My life upon her faith!"), he refuses to listen to her denial of any wrongdoing (1.3.3350). Instead,

Othello chooses to believe hearsay and the contrived placement of a handkerchief rather than his own wife:

OTHELLO. By heaven, I saw my handkerchief in's hand!
 O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart
 And mak'st me call what I intend to do
 A murder, which I thought a sacrifice!
 I saw the handkerchief!

In his article, "Slander and Skepticism in Othello," Kenneth Gross describes the handkerchief as a symbol of Othello's "passionate faithlessness," and as "so hyperbolic, so mystically externalized an image of marital faith, a magical inheritance" (820). Although what would traditionally be considered as a trifling piece of cloth, the handkerchief is laden with a mystical sentimental value that outweighs reason; it is associated with "an irrational idea of possession," which makes its misplacement more substantial than his wife's word—or even her life (820). That Desdemona's guilt is tied so damningly to a mere object reminds us that, much like Lavinia, her identity is bound up in the intertwined relationship between women and objects. Lavinia's role—up until her chastity is stolen—is to be objectified; she is Rome's ornament, a pretty, virtuous thing to look at and fight over. Similarly, Desdemona's virtue is chained to an item (her husband's handkerchief), which is the last bit of evidence that he needs to judge whether she is guilty or innocent of her alleged unfaithfulness. The fact that Desdemona has indeed lost his handkerchief proves to Othello that she has also lost her virtue.

Desdemona is judged irrevocably guilty by her jealousy-driven husband. Because Othello is the master of his wife and the head of their household, Desdemona

is rightfully subjected to his will, even in her death. In her article, "'Proper' Men and 'Fallen' Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello," Ruth Vanita describes the ownership dynamic between Desdemona and Othello as a standard for many people: "Most Indian women students perceive Othello's behavior as 'typical,' that is, as normal, husbandly, manly behavior. This concurs with Othello's own insight when he describes murderous jealousy as innate in the husband-wife relationship which posits the wife as the exclusive possession of the husband..." (342). Desdemona begs to be spared, but Othello cannot be swayed, instead choosing her fate with a swift and unjust hand. As the husband of a rumored adulteress, this is his right, which he executes coldly:

DESDEMONA. Kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight.

OTHELLO. Nay, if you strive—

DESDEMONA. But half an hour!

[OTHELLO Being done, there is no pause.]

DESDEMONA. But while I say one prayer!

OTHELLO. It is too late.

(*He smothers her.* (5.2.100-105).

In her death, Desdemona is entirely stripped of any autonomy; she cannot fight against her husband with strength or words, and her pleas for life go ignored. Her womanhood is her downfall, because she is subjected to feminine standards of sexual purity that are ultimately based on the social perception of her purity; whether or not she is a faithful and chaste wife in actuality is unimportant, because the unfounded rumor that she has been cuckolding her husband brings her purity into question and makes

her a public embarrassment. As his wife, Desdemona is Othello's property, and her "unfaithfulness" is humiliating to his ego and a rebellion against his ownership.

Generally, any perceived or outright rebellion of wife against husband in *Othello* is met with rage and spiteful words; Othello tells Emilia, Desdemona's companion, that Desdemona "turned to folly, and she was a whore" (5.2.162). Similarly, when Emilia begins to unravel Iago's plot to destroy Othello's relationship with Desdemona, he lashes out against his wife, calling her a "villainous whore!" (5.2.273). The derogatory use of this word, and slander against women in general (sexual or otherwise) is proof that with women in particular "*Othello* is indeed a drama thoroughly obsessed with questions about defamation and praise, with the place of rumor, report, tale-telling, mockery, criticism, with how a person takes these things, with how these things take a person" (Gross 821). The greatest insult against a woman is an insult against her sexual purity (or lack thereof), and a woman's sexuality is so important, that her relationships and value as a person—or object—are dependent on it. The worst thing a woman can be is impure, and the worst thing a woman can do to her husband is cuckold him, which is punishable by death in plays like *Othello*. The slander associated with female sexuality proves that the best way to smear a woman is to tarnish her sexual reputation, especially if she is married.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Titus Andronicus, *Macbeth*, and *Othello* feature a few common themes centered on the agency of women. Murder and suicide directly in relation to romantic or fatherly relationships are common themes in these plays and others (including Lady Anne's murder at the hands of her husband in *Richard III* and Ophelia's ambiguous death—

ostensibly by suicide—after her father’s death at the hands of her potential lover in *Hamlet*). Women die because their husbands or fathers decide that they must die, or because they are driven to hysteria (thanks to the weakness of their feminine constitutions) and commit suicide. Sexual availability—or lack thereof—and agency go hand in hand, and any overstepping of boundaries related to either can result in death. Because a woman’s worth is often judged by her purity, she is reduced to her gender and sexuality (Lady Macbeth calls to be “unsexed,” Lavinia’s chastity is tied to her reputation, etc.). A lack of purity—real, stolen, or imagined—makes a woman’s life not worth living anymore.

Gender, agency, and death all work together to introduce the outcomes of gender confusion or swapping as well, which we see in characters like Lady Macbeth. When Lady Macbeth renounces the female gender at the beginning of *Macbeth*, it leads to a form of death of what once was a feminine self. There are gendered limitations of agency in Shakespeare: women function vastly differently from men in his plays, to no surprise, so casting off feminine roles could potentially behoove a Shakespearean woman character because it may allow her to exercise greater agency and have fewer social obstacles in life. When men dress as women in Shakespeare, it is played for laughs, but when women dress as men in Shakespeare, they are given a unique opportunity to exercise agency without any checks, because a man is intrinsically free to exercise this right. In his tragedies, Shakespeare emphasizes this dynamic to show that the more women act like men, the more agency they are given—but this is not without limits. Due to the perceived natural inclination of womanhood toward being too soft or feminine to maintain the power that men are innately privy to, these women are

ultimately overpowered (sexually or otherwise) and are either killed or, like Lady Macbeth, die ambiguously offstage, removing any of their power and/or giving it back to the men—where it rightly belongs.

Thus, escaping the limits of the female gender is short lived, as women tend to revert back to their female roles based on their desires or weaknesses by the end of the play; Lady Macbeth's cruel "unsexed" character, for example, ultimately culminates in her guilt-ridden death. Even a female character from a Shakespearean comedy like Rosalind in *As You Like It* enjoys the uninhibited spoils of masquerading as a man until she achieves her goal and settles down in marriage, where she will be expected to submit to her husband. Gender swapping or confusion is "rectified" by the end of the play. In tragedies like *Macbeth* and *Othello*, confusion furthers the role of ambiguity as it plays a part in the way that the women die; for example, Desdemona mysteriously and briefly comes back to life before dying for good, and Lady Macbeth dies off-stage by unclear means. In a traditionally feminine character like Lavinia or Desdemona whose womanly worth is contingent on their upstanding chastity and long-held purity, their destruction is tied completely to that feminine identity. Before Lady Macbeth renounces womanhood, her agency is limited, and after Lavinia is raped and Desdemona is smeared by false rumors, they are stripped of any agency, as they are no longer the epitome of womanhood; each of these women's downfalls is tied to the fact that they are plagued by the imposed limits of womanhood or female sexuality.

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